FLARE DUMP!

Anonymous

We arrived on station during Operation Allied Force. This was our first mission, and we had drawn the graveyard shift. Part of our on-station checklist was to arm the ALR 47-ALE 39 system, the threat receiver and chaff-and-flare dispensers, generally thought to be a good idea because our slow P-3 was as maneuverable as a Mack truck.

Before this deployment, we had conducted informal training on the arming and employment of the ALE 39-ALR 47 system. Although most of the pilots had not operated this system, several had a good working knowledge of the system. We listened intently to their instructions and were satisfied that we had acquired all the knowledge required to operate these systems. Armed with this information, we set off for war.

As we arrived on station, we initiated the arming sequence of the ALE 39-ALR 47 system, using the checklist. A senior O-4 pilot with more than 3,500 hours in P-3s occupied the pilot seat. His copilot was a senior lieutenant with more than 2,000 hours in P-3s. The flight engineer was a chief, who had previously served as a fleet instructor flight engineer. We were all comfortable with each other's capabilities.

As we began the checklist, the copilot flew the aircraft while the pilot read off the items. We usually did the checklist in this fashion since the system controls were on the pilot's side console. After moving the switches to the correct positions, using a flashlight and verifying the position, the pilot placed the safe/arm switch to arm. This turned out to be an "enlightening" experience as night turned into day.

Realizing we were deploying all our flares, the pilot turned the safe/arm switch to "safe." After answering some embarrassing questions from various playmates in the area, we investigated what happened. Feeling confident that there must be a fault with the system, because we assumed we had done all our procedures according to the checklist, we left the system off for the remainder of the flight.

Upon our glorious arrival home and pinning the remaining chaff and flares, we oversaw the quality-assurance trouble shooting process. To my amazement, the ordnance QSO declared that the system was working 4.0. We then looked up the MIMs, read them thoroughly and found the embarrassing causal factor in black and white. The MIMs say that if the off-on-salvo toggle switch is inadvertently positioned to "salvo" then back to "on," the system must be turned "off" before placing the safe-arm switch to "arm," or the ALR 39 will begin the salvo cycle.

After reading this instruction, the pilot replied he had no idea of this requirement and said that when he placed the off-on-salvo switch to "on," he accidentally went to "salvo" then retarded the switch to "on." He believed at the time that this action would have no effect on the system, as it had not yet been armed. At the time, I was under the same impression.

Hearsay, word of mouth, and hangar flying are not the best way to train. That type of training is a great supplement following a thorough review of the publications that give detailed information.

As a result of this incident, the flight crew conducted formal training for the squadron. Meanwhile, we had to endure well-deserved, yet embarrassing statements, such as "I knew that." If they didn't, they do now thanks to us, the "Salvo Crew."